

“Dancing on the Distant Shore”¹

Exodus 15:1-6, 11-13, 17-18, 20-21; Romans 8: 31-39

First Presbyterian Church

September 17, 2017

Exodus 15 (selected)

¹Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD: “I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. ²The LORD is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him. ³The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name. ⁴“Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he cast into the sea; his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea. ⁵The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone. ⁶Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power— your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy.

¹¹“Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders? ¹²You stretched out your right hand, the earth swallowed them. ¹³“In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

¹⁷You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O LORD, that you made your abode, the sanctuary, O LORD, that your hands have established. ¹⁸The LORD will reign forever and ever.”

²⁰Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. ²¹And Miriam sang to them: “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

Romans 8:31-35, 37-39

³¹What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Sermon

I have never been much of a dancer... just ask Kris and the girls. I have always WANTED to be a good dancer ever since the Leslie Strain invited me to the Sadie Hawkins dance in eighth grade

¹ This sermon draws significantly on a sermon preached by James S. Lowry to the Shandon Presbyterian Church of Columbia, S.C. and published in *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2005, p. 37-46.

at North Fulton High School. I have WANTED to be a good dancer at every wedding reception I have ever attended. Believe it or not, I have even taken a few dancing lessons... but, alas, Kris will testify: I will always be WANTING to be a good dancer.

As you might guess, the fact that I cannot dance wasn't a problem for the good folks at the Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church of Atlanta... Southern Baptists are not known for that, at least not in public. And the truth is it hasn't been an issue for any of the Presbyterian congregations I have served. With the exception of Mike and Becky Stevens and a few others along the way, very few of my parishioners have seemed at all interested in dancing. Which causes me to wonder WHEN was it in our history as God's people that we forgot how to dance? And WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN if we began to remember how we once did? How we danced as a part of worship... danced as an expression of joy... danced as thanksgiving before God? I'll never forget the Sunday one of my seminary professors, Grayson Tucker, returned from visiting churches in Africa. In his sermon that day he described (to the very traditional worshipers of Highland Presbyterian Church) how African Christians danced their offering to the front of the church... and how, if there wasn't enough collected on the first pass, they would dance some more until there was. Grayson invited us to do that with OUR offering that day... and though it was sort of awkward to see the "frozen chosen" trying to dance in the aisles, it did remind us how God's people once danced: danced as a part of worship... danced as an expression of joy... danced as a way to say thank you to God.

Frankly, this is one reason to always welcome children in our grown-up worship... because sometimes in worship our children hear the music and the singing and you know, they can't help themselves – they let their bodies get involved. So they dance in pew... they dance in the aisle... they dance in worship and joy and thanksgiving - much the same way that Miriam and the other women took out their timbrels and danced when they reached the far shore of the Red Sea!

Of course, there's one HUGE difference between uninhibited children dipping and twirling and swinging their arms in the church aisle and what Miriam and the others did. You see, one is on the NEAR shore of chaos, one is on the FAR shore. One is done BEFORE the chaos, one is AFTER the chaos. One is done in youth and innocence, and one after life has taken some of its toll.

In the opening scene of Pat Conroy's novel, *Beach Music*, the main character, Jack McCall, is telling his daughter, Laura, about the night he fell in love with her mother, Shyla Fox. He had told Laura this story so often she could fill in the details and correct her father when he missed something. It's the 1950's... Jack and Shyla are high school seniors... and they are dancing on the front porch of a beach house just minutes before it is washed out to sea in a terrible storm. For Conroy, the novelist... this is a not-very-subtle image of dancing on the near shore of chaos. The world of these "love-struck" high school seniors was, indeed, about to collapse - just like the front porch on which they danced. Some of the dramas were as global as the Holocaust and the Vietnam War... some were as personal as alcoholism and dysfunctional families... and yet, the upheaval and turmoil in their lives centered on Shyla jumping to her death from the Silas Pearlman Bridge into the Charleston Harbor. It is between

the beach party and the suicide that Conroy explores (as Pat Conroy does so well) the struggle of real people in the midst of the chaos of life.

And what we learn is it's relatively easy to describe what it's like to dance on the NEAR shore of chaos. It is NOT as easy to describe what it's like to dance on the DISTANT shore of chaos... AFTER the chaos has done its damage and finally come to an end. Yet this is precisely what today's Old Testament reading is all about – how our ancestors in faith once danced on the far shore of chaos. And this is what this sermon is about – it's about remembering the story so that you and I might dance again no matter what that chaos has done to us... is doing to us... will do to us. "The Lord is my strength and my might," Moses sang in his poem. "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously," sang Miriam and the women as they danced. And the point is that the poem and the song and the dancing are not just for a time long ago... but is a vision for how the people of God will at last be.

You may be interested to know that many scholars believe that this poem and song are THE OLDEST pieces of Scripture we have. "The Lord is a warrior..." went the poem. "Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea," went the song. The oldest Bible we have is telling us about something that happened a long, long time ago. But not only that... this treasure buried deep in the memory of God's people is also telling us of something that surely will be.

You may recall the events that precede the poem and song. God said to Moses, "Tell of' Pharaoh to let my people go." Moses asked God, "When Pharaoh asks who sent me, what shall I tell him?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. Tell Pharaoh I AM sent you." Moses said to Pharaoh, "The God WHO IS said to let his people go." And after ten plagues and nearly 400 years of slavery, Pharaoh let the people of God leave Egypt. But then Pharaoh had second thoughts and changed his mind. So he sent his army and chariots in hot pursuit hoping to trap the people of God with no way to cross the Sea... the mighty Red Sea... the sea known as the Sea of Chaos. So you get the picture – the people of God trapped on the near shore of the Sea of Chaos with the hordes of Pharaoh closing in. And the God WHO IS said to Moses: "Tell the people to go forward... hold forth your staff... and tell the people to move... to move forward... move into the raging Sea of Chaos." Because that's how it is when there's chaos in your life... when there's chaos in our life together... the command from the GOD WHO IS is to move... move forward... move right into it. Again, you may recall the story we were told and that we must tell to our children... the story of a strong east wind that blew all night long... the story of the parting of the Sea of Chaos so the people walked through safely to the distant shore. "The chaos was raging all around us, children, but we walked through it on dry land." The only real difference between then and now is what we name the chaos and naming the chaos is not hard for us. It gets catalogued every morning in the paper and every evening on the news. It seems like we're always standing on the near shore of some chaos or another.

What could be more chaotic than two devastating hurricanes striking our country just days apart?

- Or waging war against an enemy you can't see until they use a rented van or human body as a weapon?

- Or watching the rogue leader of a rogue nation threaten nuclear war?
- Or facing yet another election with our nation so bitterly divided.
- Or being among the 140 million people who are now worried sick about identity theft because their private information has been stolen.

It's not hard to see the chaos... even to understanding the chaos... is not very hard at all. What's hard is getting THROUGH the chaos to the other shore... that's the great thing.

Or to bring it even closer to home, what could be more chaotic than just how fast things are changing...

- in our neighborhoods and schools and churches
- in what is considered acceptable behavior in our own bodies
- in our children and in our parents.

Not to mention the change when there's a divorce

- change when there's a marriage
- change when there's a new baby
- Change when a job is lost
- change when there's a retirement
- change when there' an illness
- change when there's a death.

God said to the east wind: "Blow, mighty east wind, blow... blow back the waters of chaos so my people can walk through." It is the story of what God once did. It is the promise of what God still does. It is the hope of what God shall surely do.

And it is what many, many generations later the Apostle Paul affirmed when he said:

"I am sure... that neither death nor life,
nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, not things to come,
nor power, nor height, nor depth,
nor anything in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul offers a "fresh take" on that old, deep memory... when the people of God got through (on solid footing) to the distant shore of chaos. On that day Moses recited a poem: The Lord is my strength and my might... he has become my salvation..." And Miriam and the women rose up to sing and dance: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously." It has become a vision of what shall surely be. So, what do you think? Shall we dance?